

**Safeguarding coastal culture and heritage in
Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada:
Bringing together the tangible and the intangible.**



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Introduction

The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) is a Canadian non-profit organization which was established by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1984 to stimulate an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the architectural heritage of the province. HFNL funds building restoration projects, and has an educational role and undertakes or sponsors events, publications and other projects designed to promote the value of the province's heritage.

Following a decline in local fishing stocks, and a moratorium on the historic cod fishery, HFNL has been working on a series of projects to safeguard and document both the vernacular architecture and intangible cultural heritage of coastal fishing communities. This paper outlines some of the programs developed by HFNL.

Newfoundland and Labrador: The Context

Newfoundland and Labrador is the easternmost province of Canada. Situated in the country's Atlantic region, it incorporates the island of Newfoundland and mainland Labrador to the northwest. It has a combined area of 405,212 square kilometres, with a population of just over 514,000. Most of the population is concentrated on the eastern portion of the island of Newfoundland.

It is a province with a rich cultural heritage, with both native aboriginal populations, and a settler population of predominantly English and Irish ancestry. The island of Newfoundland has a long history associated with the North Atlantic cod fishery, and much of its local culture and flavour evolved in small fishing villages scattered along the island's long coastline. Linguistic, cultural, and social traditions persisted in many small isolated communities after they had faded or changed in the European communities where they were born.

By 1992, once-plentiful codfish stocks had dwindled to near extinction. Fearing they would disappear entirely if the fisheries remained open, the federal government of the day instituted a moratorium on northern cod stocks. The moratorium abruptly ended a way of life that had endured for generations in many rural communities, leading to a decline of rural settlements throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

In the fishing community of Keels, as one example, the population dropped from around 200 people in 1982 to close to 50 by 2012. An observer in that community notes that “residents have gradually moved away to seek work in places like Alberta, and the landscape of Keels has dramatically changed. Many buildings have been abandoned, some torn down, and a number of houses have been bought up by summer residents from Ontario or the United States”¹ -- a post-moratorium story repeated over and over throughout much of the province.

Out-migration and unemployment impacted not only the physical landscape, but also the intangible cultural heritage tied to the fishery, and the pattern of life in small rural communities. The resulting movement of young people to urban areas or out of the province meant that cultural traditions were not being transmitted from generation to generation in the same way, or to the extent to which they had once been passed down.

Conservation of Vernacular Architecture

Fisheries architecture in Newfoundland and Labrador historically included a complex of buildings and structures referred to collectively as a “fishing premises” or “rooms.” The “stage” was the most important building, where fish was cut and prepared, followed by wooden fish-drying platforms called “flakes.” Often, these would be accompanied by another storehouse building, simply called a “store,” or a structure for the storage of nets and gear, oftentimes called a “net loft.” While these wooden structures are architecturally simple, they show a great individuality, and great deal of variety from location to location:

“While traditional fisheries sites across the province have many physical similarities, there are variations in fisheries architecture from one region to the next. For instance, stages in a community with steep cliffs might have quite long ‘shored up’ foundations to provide improved balance and stronger footholds. Our diverse coastline, varying harbour depths and the fish species processed in particular regions explain the element of variety in Newfoundland and Labrador’s fisheries heritage architecture.”²

Present day fishing premises are generally comprised of at least one building, the stage/storehouse, and a wharf. The physical forms of present day fishing stages have remained essentially unchanged from the days of the family fishery. However, relatively few premises have flakes, the wooden platforms for drying fish. This is due to two primary reasons: the process of drying has been modernized with mechanical methods; and there is only a small commercial market for dried salt fish. Many old buildings have been demolished or abandoned, though some new buildings have also been constructed from modern materials, and utilized for new purposes.

¹ G. Pocius, “The 2012 Keels Field School”, in: G. Pocius (ed.), *Living Spaces: The Architecture of the Family Fishery in Keels, Newfoundland*. St. John’s, 2013, p. 2-4.

² Historical Background on the Fishery. www.fisheriesheritage.ca/fisheriesHeritage.asp. Accessed 10 November 2014.

Memorial University PhD candidate Adrian Morrison notes, for the community of Quidi Vidi:

“As historic example were washed away by the ocean or fell into disrepair they were continually rebuilt or replaced with similar versions constructed according to long established vernacular traditions.... Once a hub of the industrial fishery, some stages lost their relevance as economic centres with the decline of Newfoundland’s fisheries in the 1990s. The functions of the structures have changed. New contemporary stages often serve as centres of recreation rather than industry.”³

Recognizing the rapid changes taking place to the vernacular building stock in the province following the cod moratorium, and concerned that many historic fishing buildings would be lost, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador established the Fisheries Heritage Preservation Program with five pilot projects in 2002.

The Fisheries Heritage Preservation Program was designed as a granting program to help restore and rebuild traditional wooden fishing buildings. Small financial grants were made available, ranging from \$500 to \$2000 per property, or up to \$10,000 for community-based projects involving multiple structures. Priority was given to communities which had not received heritage funding in the past.

The pilot project was a success, and the program was expanded from 2002 onwards, eventually winding down in 2014. Funding was directed to individuals, communities and non- profit groups to restore stages, stores, net lofts, and other buildings associated with the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. Assistance was provided for the preservation and restoration of heritage features using original materials.

“The Fisheries Heritage Preservation Program has proven to be one of our most popular and successful programs. Indeed, the results of the preservation program are very impressive,” says George Chalker, Executive Director with HFNL. “Traditional fisheries buildings have defined the look of our coastal communities. Significant inshore fisheries infrastructure throughout the province, including flakes, stages, and fishing premises, are under threat. Much of this remarkable heritage is being lost with each passing year, and much more of it is threatened. Once they vanish, they cannot be replaced.”⁴

One typical example of the type of work made possible by the funding program is the project undertaken by Mr. Roy Bulgin, the owner of Bulgin’s Room. Located in the rural community of Durrell, Twillingate, situated on New World Island on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, Bulgin’s Room was built in the late 1800s. The premises include a stage, flake, and extensive wharves.

Bulgin applied to the Fisheries Heritage Preservation Grant program in 2003 and work was completed by July of the following year. Due to the age of the structures, and the fact that major

³ Adrian Morrison. “The Pittman Stage” in: Pocius and Wilson (eds.) Quidi Vidi Village: A Part of St. John’s, Apart from St. John’s. St. John’s, 2014, p. 33-39.

⁴ Heritage Foundation Announces 2013 Fisheries Heritage Preservation Program.

www.fisheriesheritage.ca/Files/15_Category/press_release_2013.pdf. Accessed 10 November 2014.

work had not been done since the 1970s, Bulgin was concerned that sea and ice would damage the structures beyond repair. Bulgin's Room underwent foundation repairs by removing rotted timbers and replacing them. The main building was moved in order to replace the wharf underneath, and was put back in place afterwards. Without the funding program, it is very likely that premises like Bulgin's Room would simply have vanished. Bulgin himself wrote,

"Maintaining our link to the past is very important. It keeps us in contact with our heritage and culture. Providing financial aid to help preserve old properties such as fishing rooms will help us maintain that link and preserve Old Newfoundland for future Newfoundlanders."⁵

Since 2002, the program has disbursed over \$450,000 to help restore the vernacular architecture of the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. The majority of these grants have been for \$2000 or less. The program has funded over 270 projects in 40 communities, resulting in the restoration of hundreds of fisheries buildings. The buildings restored were worked on, in most instances, by fisherman and their families, and so what has also been preserved, alongside the buildings themselves, has been a unique set of traditional skills and knowledge around construction methods and materials.

Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Fishery

In 2006, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador released its Provincial Cultural Strategy, Creative Newfoundland and Labrador. It outlined the need for a strategy to safeguard intangible cultural heritage and recommended to "over the longer term, create a public advisory committee with responsibility for the recognition and designation of provincial intangible cultural heritage."⁶

Dr. Gerald Pocius, one of the driving figures in the development of ICH policy in Newfoundland and Labrador, writes:

"There is no doubt that over the years, the local heritage community has embraced ICH as a concept because it felt a sense of urgency in a time of extreme change. With the collapse of the cod fishery, Government and NGOs all realized that rural communities no longer would be places tied to the resources of water and land, populated by families related by kinship, often there for generations. Rather, outports were becoming gentrified summer enclaves, filled with outsiders who came for a month or two, to engage briefly in what they saw as some authentic culture. The fishing had stopped, locals were leaving, and ironically the tourism industry that was going to be the salvation of rural Newfoundland was now bringing in people with money to buy up communities, especially highly coveted 'waterfront property.' Policies and programs needed to be put in place to encourage the living traditions of the province to continue. In this time of cultural uncertainty, ICH focused on the ongoing traditions central to provincial identity."⁷

⁵ Conserving Our Fisheries Heritage. St. John's, 2006, p. 8.

⁶ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Creative Newfoundland and Labrador: The Blueprint for Development and Investment in Culture. St. John's, 2006.

⁷ G. Pocius. "The Emergence of Cultural Heritage Policy in Newfoundland and Labrador." Newfoundland Quarterly. 103:11 2010, p. 43-45.

Starting in 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador was chosen as the agency that would be responsible for the development and implementation of the province's ICH strategy. Work continued on HFNL's original mandate of architectural conservation, but a new office was created to oversee projects related to intangible cultural heritage, one of the only organizations of its type in Canada.

The mission of HFNL's Intangible Cultural Heritage Office is to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs. This is achieved through initiatives that celebrate, record, disseminate, and promote living heritage.

In 2012, HFNL organized a folklife festival around the theme of "make and break" engines - a type of hardy vintage boat engine used on small fishing boats through the first half of the twentieth century. The engines were simple, with a limited number of parts, making it easy for fishermen to repair them quickly and cheaply while on land or water.⁸ Changes in marine technology, boatbuilding styles, and the fishery led to their decline, but a number of enthusiasts continued to maintain, collect, restore, and use the old engines. Many rural people, not necessarily boat owners, had strong memories of the distinctive sound of the engines, a nostalgia-inducing "tucka-tucka-tuck" noise, once a common part of the aural landscape of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The festival was organized following HFNL's strategy for ICH safeguarding: ethnographic research was conducted; vintage repair manuals were discovered, digitized, and shared online; community experts and tradition bearers were mobilized; and a public flotilla of vintage boats with working engines was organized.

Following the public event, a "parts swap" was organized, where boat engine enthusiasts were encouraged to bring pieces and parts for vintage engines to a central location. There, they traded and sold pieces, shared information, and made connections. Prior to the festival, most of the enthusiasts had worked in isolation; the festival gave people with a common interest a chance to forge a new, mutually-beneficial community. After the event, the festival coordinator reported:

"The smiles... around me on the day of the events came from the sense of belonging, a sense of camaraderie in an endeavor that some of these men may have thought was impossible - bringing new life to these old engines. Many of the men that gathered that day did not know each other, although they may have known of one another. The older generation mixed with the younger and by the end of the day new friendships were born - new friendships that will hopefully last as long as the influence of the make and break engines. There were whispers that day of making the event an annual meet, of engine owners coming together to form an association which would allow them all to keep their engines running and, hopefully, get more back on the water."⁹

One of the community partners in the event was the Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador, an organization which operates as a conservator, exhibitor and transmitter of the

⁸ J. Carey, "Max Clarke's Make and Break Engines", Intangible Cultural Heritage Update 35, 2012, p. 2-3.

⁹ J. Carey, "Make and Break Festival Review", Intangible Cultural Heritage Update 36, 2012, p. 2-3.

province's knowledge and history of wooden boats, their economic use, and contribution to community life. HFNL made its collected ethnographic material and list of informants and participants available to the Boat Museum, who then used that information to organize further boat engine events. Their long-term plan is to include the emerging make and break engine community into future "boats on the water" events, encouraging the transmission of traditional knowledge around boats and boat making.

The boat engine festival partnership between HFNL and the Wooden Boat Museum is one of several ongoing collaborations between the two organizations.

In cooperation with the museum's 7th Annual Wooden Boat Conference, HFNL organized and delivered a four-day intensive workshop entitled "Fishing For Folklore: An Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage." The workshop was held in the historic fishing community of Petty Harbour Maddox Cove. Participants learned about planning an ICH project, writing field notes, oral history interviewing, safeguarding traditional crafts and skills, creating memory maps of communities, documenting traditional boatbuilding techniques, public folklore programming, and report writing. Participants met local fishermen and were able to learn, first-hand, about the fishery, boat-building techniques, mending fishing nets, and the traditional techniques involved in splitting and filleting codfish.

Documenting the intangible cultural heritage of the cod fishery has been identified as a key area for research. In 2014, HFNL brought together its work with fisheries architecture and its work on intangible cultural heritage, announcing a grant program for projects to document, record, present, or safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of the fishery in the province.

A call for proposals was developed, and municipal councils, museums, archives, and NGOs were invited to submit proposals for documentation projects that would focus on the intangible cultural heritage associated with boats, their builders and those who went to sea, net making and mending, crab or lobster pot repair, knot-tying and ropework, knowledge associated with marine navigation, the architecture of fishing stages and associated material culture, the business of making fish, or oral histories related to the fishery. Out of the submissions, three projects were selected to test the program.

The first project is from the community of Pouch Cove, submitted by the Pouch Cove Heritage Committee. It will focus on the documentation and preservation of the community's cod-liver oil heritage. For over a century, the sale of cod livers provided supplementary income to local fishing families, but the last of the local cod-liver oil factories closed in the 1960s. Today, there are only a handful of people left with knowledge of how cod livers were harvested and converted to oil. The community's ICH project is designed to collect and preserve information surrounding the production of cod-liver oil, as well as community memories about the use of cod-liver oil and its byproduct, liver offal.

The documentation work will result in a number of products: a video documentary; audio recordings and printed transcriptions; outdoor community storyboards combining text and photography; a printed pamphlet which will be distributed to local residents, and a GPS triggered app for mobile phones, which will allow users to hear the voices of local residents relating stories and memories about the places where the cod liver oil factories once stood.

The second project is from the community of Cupids, submitted by the non-profit group Cupids Legacy, Inc. Their project will focus on the documentation of traditional fishing grounds, and on changes wrought by technology to traditional navigation techniques. Currently, fishers use a variety of modern technological devices, such as fish finders, depth sounders, and GPS devices. The use of this technology has resulted in a significant decrease in local fish-finding lore related to the finding and utilization of underwater shoals. Historically, fishermen on the water would line up a series of local landmarks (a church steeple or a cairn of rocks, as examples) to triangulate and position their boat over a certain good fishing spot. Many of these marine locations had names, such as “Offa Rock” or “The Patch.” The project will generate photographs and textual information about these traditional locations, landmarks, and names, and generate a map or maps of the local fishing grounds.

The third project is a collaboration with Them Days Incorporated, a registered charity dedicated to collecting, protecting and promoting the stories of Labrador. Them Days Inc. publishes a quarterly oral history magazine and maintains an archive containing Labrador-related materials. For their project, the organization will carry out oral history interviews with people closely associated with the Labrador fishery. Material from these interviews, combined with archival research, will be used to compile a special “Them Days” magazine issue that will highlight the history of the fishery in Labrador. Particular attention will be paid to what differentiated the Labrador fishery from other fisheries around the province, and the interaction and interconnections between migratory fishers from the island of Newfoundland and the resident fishers of Labrador.

These three projects will allow HFNL to expand on its work of safeguarding coastal culture and heritage, and will bring attention to geographically-specific traditions and knowledge.

Conclusions

Originally established to conserve historic buildings, HFNL has responded to a shift in the global heritage movement, incorporating safeguarding measures for intangible cultural heritage into its existing programs for architectural conservation. In the fishing communities of rural Newfoundland and Labrador, architecture, place, cultural heritage, and traditional knowledge are interwoven. In order to best safeguard the traditions of coastal communities, strategies must recognize the importance, and the interconnectedness, of both the tangible, and the intangible. HFNL’s work in coastal communities with fisheries heritage is a good example of this approach.